

Notes from a Wind Down:

Reflections on Future Research, Trends in Evaluation and Lessons Learned from Public/Private Ventures' 35 Years Working to Improve Social Programs

By Nadya K. Shmavonian, July 2012

Reflections on Future Research

Throughout its history, P/PV has been dedicated to answering practical research questions that offer the greatest prospect of improving programs—and outcomes—for children, youth and families. During the past year, we engaged in outreach and discussions with content experts, and mined our recent projects and findings, to identify some of the most pressing questions in three of our core areas of work—mentoring, out-of-school time, and labor market transitions. While we regret that we won't be able to tackle these questions at P/PV, we're sharing some of our thoughts here, in hopes that they offer guidance to other researchers, funders and practitioners.

One vital subject of inquiry cuts across our major areas of work. Time and again, we have been struck by the importance of relationships—between volunteers and program participants, between participants and staff, and between peers within programs and communities. In mentoring, of course, relationships are central, but they also play a role in out-of-school time, workforce development and juvenile justice programs. Regardless of setting, relationships with supportive adults (and with peers—who can exert a positive or a negative influence) are critical factors in helping young people chart a path toward healthy and productive futures. Ultimately, the work of the social sector is people-driven, and more (and different) research is needed to understand the dynamics of successful relationships and the practices that foster them.

Mentoring

The mentoring field has grown tremendously in the last two decades, and a strong research base has emerged. Looking ahead, we believe there are three areas that demand greater study—to produce more mentoring programs that make a difference for young people in high-poverty communities.

- **Improving practice.** How are specific program practices (e.g., mentor training, or the amount and timing of support provided for matches) linked with match success? How should training and support be structured to yield the strongest effects? How does technology (e.g., in training, support, match meetings) affect relationships?
- **Cost.** What do different forms of mentoring cost? What do different practices cost? How much would it cost to enhance different practices? What does a specific amount of money yield, in terms of serving a specific population to achieve specific outcomes?
- **Outcomes.** What are the long-term effects of different types of mentoring?

We are currently transferring a number of important ongoing mentoring projects to other organizations, including a study of the benefits of mentoring for high-risk youth, being conducted in partnership with Washington State Mentors and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In

addition, we are pleased to share that our longstanding investment in mentoring for children of prisoners—and more recently, children of military families—will live on, through a new nonprofit called Amachi, Inc.

Out-of-School Time

The out-of-school-time field is in a period of significant transition. The extended-learning day movement is blurring the lines between the school day and after-school time, and schools and nonprofit practitioners are looking less at individual programs and more at how they might create 'integrated' systems that offer children and youth multiple pathways to experience and learning. This has important implications for research and evaluation. As one interviewee noted:

We should stop chasing the idea that we can very accurately assess the particular incremental impact of an after-school program. I'm not sure why we're doing this anymore. We have enough information to say that the really good programs have impacted students in the following ways. Why not declare victory and say, 'we know what the good programs look like and what they do. How do we embed these programs in our high-need schools, in partnership with all of the other reform initiatives that are going on, and in particular, in pursuit of a new ideal of individualized educational programming?' That's where the interest is going in the next decade.

With this in mind, we believe the following two areas will be critical moving forward:

- **Structure and quality.** Which program practices and features influence various outcomes? Which types of quality improvement strategies are likely to result in improved outcomes for youth? Which strategies are most effective with staff of varying levels of experience and education? What infrastructural elements (training, data systems, advocacy, leadership, etc.) are most important for achieving and maintaining quality?
- **Participation, outcomes and impact.** What is the relationship between participation and outcomes, particularly when examined across programs and settings? How can different interventions or strategies be integrated to support youth's achievement and success, in and out of school?

Labor Market Transitions

As public funding for workforce development dwindles, youth unemployment rates remain exceptionally high. Far too many young people leave high school unprepared for work or postsecondary education. A number of promising approaches have emerged in recent years, which attempt to arm young people with skills, experience, support and connections that will help them get and keep jobs and ultimately develop gainful careers. We believe the following two areas are particularly ripe for further study.

- **Sectoral employment.** In 2010, P/PV's Sectoral Employment Impact Study (SEIS) showed that mature, nonprofit-led "sector" programs—which provide training for skilled jobs in high-demand sectors—can have a powerful impact on participants, including young adults. While the programs weren't designed specifically for young people, subgroup analysis found that young adult participants earned about \$5,300 more than young adult controls during the two-year study period. What could a sector program tailored to the specific needs of young adults accomplish? Could it be "tiered" for youth with varying degrees of work readiness? Can systems traditionally attuned to the needs

of adult job seekers adjust to serve the diverse needs and circumstances of young adults? Do young people have better employment outcomes if they are reached through traditional youth-serving agencies? Alternatively, can youth development principles be integrated into adult workforce agencies that serve large numbers of young people?

- **Temporary jobs and alternative staffing.** While less research has been done on these approaches, we are interested in their potential for young adults, especially given the temporary staffing industry's growing share of the US labor market. Looking ahead, it would be useful to document the extent to which programs are using temporary work experience as a strategy for young people, and to examine whether short-term or temporary work experiences can lead to longer-term labor market impacts. In coming weeks, P/PV will release a brief that describes the work of "alternative staffing organizations" (ASOs), which are similar to conventional temporary staffing businesses, except their primary goal is to help disadvantaged job seekers gain entry into the workforce and build experience. We hope future research will determine whether ASOs are an effective strategy for young people. What is the role of various support services offered by ASOs, in connection with job brokering services? Could the ASO model help meet the needs of young job seekers who must earn a living while they participate in training?

We look forward to seeing other institutions examine some of these important questions.

Trends in Evaluation

I would also like to offer a few parting questions and reflections that are grounded in P/PV's historic experience, as well as some speculation about future trends in the evaluation of social programs.

This winter, our staff reviewed a blog post written by John Gargani in January of this year, called "Evaluation Predictions" Among the trends he anticipates is the rise of internal evaluation: *"The job responsibilities of internal evaluators will expand and routinely include organizational development, strategic planning, and program design. Advances in online data collection and real-time reporting will increase the transparency of internal evaluation, reducing the utility of external consultants."* In part, this reflects the worthy desire to push programs to embrace their own performance management and improvement. At P/PV, we have long advocated for building organizations' capacities to use data (in real time) to improve their performance and effectiveness. But there are some troubling downsides associated with this trend, which the field must grapple with:

- What does it mean to lose the perspective of an "objective" external evaluator? We know from our experience that both program staff/managers and external evaluators bring important insights to developing and deploying research and analyzing results. We also know that the best learning happens when the program and the evaluator engage in a real *partnership*—which sheds a kind of light that neither perspective alone could generate. Such close, *long-term* working partnerships were at the core of P/PV's model, but require dedicated financial support over many years.
- There's a case to be made that while program improvement is getting more attention, it remains an area that receives more lip service than real investment. There's rhetoric around the push to use data, but a lack of resources for the kind of long-term intensive work that is needed to improve programs over time—e.g., evaluations that use sophisticated *implementation* research, as well as impact assessment, and

efforts to build the capacity of program staff to understand and use their data in an ongoing way (and to apply lessons emerging from external research).

- There is a gaping hole around building and improving *organizations*—not just the *programs* of nonprofits. How can we improve the *organizations* that serve youth in our nations high-poverty communities? Are funders paying for dedicated data management staff, who can select the right data system and use it to collect, analyze and act on those data that are critical to improving their organizational performance? With so many organizations being “hollowed out” (Paul Light), unless funders allocate resources explicitly to fund these positions, they are all too frequently collapsed into multiple other roles, and the full power of active data management is never realized.
- How will lessons across studies be mined, if evaluation is largely internal? Gargani predicts that a national evaluation registry may be created, where research questions, methods, contextual factors, and findings from different studies would be tracked. The registry is a fascinating idea, but we worry about a lack of resources (or time!) for thoughtful analysis. People—within nonprofits—need to have the resources to examine results that are emerging and *think* about what they might mean. Who could do the kind of meta-analysis that a registry would enable? And how far would they sit from actual on-the-ground programs? Throughout our history, we have worried about the kinds of conclusions that will be drawn if researchers are totally disconnected from programs (and the “cloud” seems even more remote than the ivory tower!).

A special kind of learning takes place when practitioners can come together and compare notes about what’s working and what’s not, informed by real-time data and in partnership with a thoughtful evaluator (in many ways, this is the traditional demonstration model). This approach helps answer questions not only about which program practices yield results, but also how they play out in different settings—which is crucial for scaling up effective solutions. We have to know more about which practices are essential and which ones can/should be tailored to different communities and contexts (organizational, economic, etc.). Unfortunately, current trends in evaluation don’t bode well for this kind of organization-by-organization experimentation and shared learning.

Lessons Learned

I would also like to share a few final takeaways from what P/PV has learned over these many years:

1. Our work consistently points to the critical importance of **caring adult relationships** in the lives of children and youth. Countless P/PV projects have incorporated formal and informal mentoring for disadvantaged young people. Programs of all kinds can leverage this insight (and learn from the research about what makes for effective mentoring relationships.)
2. Programs need to think carefully about whom they want to reach. They need to ground **targeting** and recruitment efforts in a **solid theory of change**—and then use data to make sure they’re reaching the right people with the right services.
3. It is hard to ignore the skyrocketing incarceration rates that occurred during P/PV’s lifetime, largely associated with mandatory drug sentencing. There are clearly troubling

connections between our failing schools, impoverished communities with few resources or opportunities for young people, high unemployment and crime/incarceration—all of which **disproportionately affect young people of color**. I hope that P/PV programs like the National Faith Based Initiative, Ready4Work, the Youth Violence Reduction Partnership and Philadelphia's The Choice is Yours have offered and (will continue to offer) a roadmap—challenging as it may be—for how to provide very high-risk young people with alternatives to crime and violence, which can lead them to good jobs and healthy productive lives.

4. As already noted, it is vital to **build organizations' capacities** to use data to improve their performance. *Good Stories Aren't Enough: Becoming Outcomes-Driven in Workforce Development* has been one of P/PV's most popular publications for more than six years, having been downloaded from our website well over 100,000 times. More recently, our *Using Data in Multi-Agency Collaborations* report also generated significant interest. This reinforces what many of us already know: Most nonprofits want to get better, but they need good tools and support to help them get there. Our history suggests three important lessons related to this challenge: **High-quality program implementation** is at least half the battle (maybe more); programs often need a lot of support to accomplish strong implementation; and, closely related, **it costs money to run effective social programs**. Of course, there is a tremendous amount to be learned about what qualities make an organization effective, what strategies are best for helping improve performance, and how data can be used to support this process. But we do know that **a strong, research-based theory of change + good implementation + using data** to inform adjustments is a recipe for success. And not nearly enough programs have these basic ingredients. Funders need to actively invest—**core support**—in high-performing *organizations*, so that these nonprofits can develop and *sustain* the financial, data management, communications and fundraising skills that are essential to support effective programs.
5. **Transitions matter**. Many of the most promising programs P/PV has studied reach young people at key moments of transition (e.g., going from middle school to high school, becoming a parent, being arrested or being released from incarceration). Particularly at a time when we need to target limited resources to have the most impact, the field needs to get smarter about identifying—and then supporting young people through—critical turning points or transitions.
6. Create genuine **pathways of opportunity and support**. Our work—and that of others—has consistently shown that even the best, most effective programs generally have relatively small impacts, and are certainly not “magic bullets” when it comes to moving people up and out of poverty. What low-income youth really need are ongoing and developmentally appropriate opportunities and supports, which, over time, may substantially alter the trajectory of their lives (and create some semblance of real equal opportunity—since middle- and upper-income youth routinely have access to such supports). Our work suggests that beyond the effectiveness of individual programs, we need to be looking at how to knit these programs together within communities, how to create linkages from one opportunity to the next, and how to measure the impact of such pathways of support over many years.
7. And last, but not least, taken from Gary Walker's 2004-2005 P/PV Annual Report: **“Credible evidence of effectiveness is the best way to ensure that people are in fact**

being helped, that resources are being spent well, and that the political will to support social policies and programs stays strong and does not wither.” Say no more....

So I close with best wishes that our colleagues who continue in their efforts to improve the effectiveness of social programs will find the resources and support to carry on the vital work that remains—to ensure that *all* of our nation’s young people receive the fighting chance they need to transition successfully to adulthood.

It has been a true pleasure for me to serve at the helm of this incredibly thoughtful, mission-focused organization over the better part of these past three years. I look forward to seeing our current projects continue in new homes, and hope that the political will exists to sustain these efforts into the future. I want to thank the many funders who have supported P/PV over the past 35 years, and particularly those who have stayed with us with critical funding throughout this wind down process. Your support has been invaluable.